



THEME-LED SCRIPT DEVELOPMENT

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Ben Michael

B.A FILM AND TELEVISION

MASTER OF ARTS

School of Media and Communication

College of Design and Social Context

RMIT University

12th of June 2015

Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis/project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Ben Adam Michael

12th of June 2015

Acknowledgements

This project has been an eye-opening and personally very worthwhile undertaking. I would like to thank my two supervisors, Lisa French and Craig Batty, whose knowledge and support have been invaluable. I would also like to acknowledge the love and support of my partner Sam and two children Rolando and Babette. They are my true inspiration.

Abstract

This practice-led research project takes the form of a one-hour television script and an accompanying dissertation that explores how theme can be used as the primary craft tool for the development of what is anticipated to be a compelling screen work.

The dissertation is structured to reflect the integrated nature of theory and practice from the earliest stages of the script's development (the concept, creation of the world and characters) on to the plotting of the narrative and, finally, the writing of individual scenes. The dissertation will trace the creative process that I, as a writer, undertook to develop the script and demonstrate how each stage of the creative process was informed by the research into theme.

Drawing on my many years as a screenwriter, my aim with this project was to investigate how theme might go beyond being something a writer discovers *as* they write to something that informs *how* they write; to see what would happen when theme comes first in the writing process and if this craft decision would lead to what I consider a more compelling, emotionally satisfying, finished project.

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
1. The question behind this creative practice research project	6
2. The project at the centre of this creative practice research project	8
3. The writer of this creative practice research project	9
Chapter One: Exploring theme	11
1. Why theme matters	11
2. A clear definition of how 'theme' will be used in this dissertation and project	14
Chapter Two: Writers, thinkers and practitioners	17
1. Current and historical thought on the subject	17
2. The main sources of inspiration	20
Chapter Three: From macro to micro – how research led to the creation of the project	31
1. Concept and theme	31
2. Character and theme	38
3. Narrative and theme	42
4. Scene writing and theme	46
Conclusion	53
Appendix	56
i. <i>Access emotional range</i>	
ii. <i>Access thematic range (Part One)</i>	
iii. <i>Access thematic range (Part Two)</i>	
iv. <i>Finding the thematic statement</i>	
v. <i>Developing characters and a world that can carry the theme</i>	
vi. <i>Develop macro narrative</i>	
vii. <i>Develop micro narrative</i>	
viii. <i>Write</i>	

Introduction

1. The question behind this creative practice research project

The purpose of this practice-led research inquiry is to write a television script informed by the question:

‘How might an understanding of theme’s relationship with concept, character and narrative assist in the development of a television script?’

I sought to investigate what the effect on both my process and the resulting writing would be if I used theme as the first thought in the development process. Many books on screenwriting, such as Robert McKee’s *Story* (1999), John Yorke’s *Into the Woods* (2013), and Christopher Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* (2007), state the importance of a clear theme and how one might use it as a development tool in the creation of a screenplay. For example, Vogler believes that ‘knowing the theme is essential to making the final choices in dialogue, action, and set dressing that turn a story into a coherent design’ (Vogler 2007, p. 96) and Yorke goes as far as suggesting that ‘without theme, no story’ (Yorke 2013, p. 194). However, none of these authors see it as more important than other considerations, such as character or narrative. Yorke’s book, for example, devotes only four of its three hundred pages to theme.

What they all agree on is that the theme is the message of a script; it is the story’s true meaning, what it is trying to say, or as Yorke puts it, ‘For theme is the drama. All dramas are arguments about the nature of the world’ (Yorke 2013, p. 192). As I will go on to argue, theme is therefore the script’s most important function: the deep emotional connection it can make with a viewer.

With this in mind I wanted to investigate how using theme as the primary craft tool would inform the rest of a script’s craft considerations. Research into these considerations relating to character creation, structure and scene dynamics would still guide the creation of my script and be noted in this dissertation but they will always be looped back to search for how they relate to theme. Or, more

importantly, how theme can inform how they are employed. At all times during the project, theme would be connected to the practice. Flights of creative fancy, amusing dialogue or beautiful visuals would not be considered unless they related clearly and tangibly to the theme.

As a way of working, it was important to set out clear craft rules and to let these guide the work that followed. While this often proved challenging and counter intuitive, there were times I felt my creative mind was being led by a dogmatic approach, something I acknowledge as a potential argument against using theme. It also honed my writing and thoughts to the essence of what I wanted the project to say. As I will argue, what a writer wants to say is *why* one writes a story; this way of thinking about making has value to both myself and to the larger writing community.

While the majority of my research investigated traditional thought on the craft of screenwriting, part of my research methodology included the viewing of television shows from around the world, the reading of their scripts and, in some cases, the viewing of lectures given by their creators. The purpose of this was that once I had settled on some rules of screenwriting craft, as dictated by the research that I would use in the development of my project, I felt it important to watch and read shows that influenced me to see whether what I had discovered was as clear in those shows as the research suggested it should be. This proved an illuminating and clear confirmation that the process I was undertaking had merit and was evident in the current practice of other writers/creators.

To further illustrate the integrated nature of theory and practice while writing the script, I kept a creative log of the process so that I would be able to go back and reflect on key activities and decision-making. This will be drawn from occasionally to illuminate how the research informed the creation of the project. The keeping of a reflective log enabled me to chart the progress of my project and hone in on key, specific, insightful moments and how they informed the work. I was guided in this practice by the work of Jenny Moon and Gareth Thomas from Bournemouth University's Centre for Excellence in Media

Practice. In their *Guidelines for the Production Analysis element of Media Production degree work – with particular regard to its reflective aspects*, they state:

It can thus become a valuable source of ideas and the place in which problems are thought through. Thus, while the journal should be principally focused on the production activity, it will be better if it covers much wider aspects of the project such as the planning, reflections, the 'notes on the back of envelopes', etc.

I followed this suggestion and diarised all my thoughts on the process as it unfolded in the hope that I would be better able to reflect on my methodology.

2. The project at the centre of this creative practice research project

The script that underpinned this investigation is *The Golden Breed*, a six-part television drama series that has elements of comedy and action. It depicts the story of a family living off the riches gained from the father's illegal gambling business and how their seemingly perfect lives are put under pressure from the police who are keen to stamp out all the SP bookies in Australia, and a wayward, truth-telling son who returns home to settle some old scores.

A short summary of the project:

Mount Eliza, 1984. The semi-rural beachside suburb is littered with mansions built from fortunes made in back-room deals and long-shot gambles. The socially progressive '70s have been and gone. We've entered an era framed by the economy and we're sitting at the precipice of a financial boom. The new rich are living like there's no tomorrow. It's the beginning of credit cards, living beyond our means and excess. This heightened and energetic environment sets the tone for the show – where the GOLD family reign over a life won at a gamble.

The GOLDS are: PETER (50), his wife JUDY (45) and their son PAUL (17). They're the image of perfection and until now they've put on a successful show of it all being real.

PETER GOLD is a starting price (SP) bookie, one of the last of this iconic profession that, although illegal, has been a feature of Australian life since the 1930s. With the rise of the TAB, police were ordered to stamp out the SP trade and Peter's their number one target. He's been running a long time and the law, his age and the years of stress are catching up. He just has to make it through to the Melbourne Cup. One more big win and he can get out – for good.

3. The writer of this creative practice research project

I have worked continuously as a professional television writer since 1993. In that time I have created, plotted, edited, script produced and written over 3000 hours of commercial broadcast television. This work has been primarily on mass-produced serial shows and a smaller amount of children's TV. During this time I have also worked as a musician: a part of Australia's fertile musical underground.

In the past five years I have moved into the academic and teaching world and have started to research writing more intensely. Different types of collaborations, using themed development, have led to my first feature film credit, *Is This the Real World*, a \$1.4 million coming-of-age drama, completed in December 2013. Much of the research I undertook for this dissertation was used to help create that script. While it will not be a subject of this dissertation, I want to acknowledge how this research has had a positive impact on my commissioned writing work. I have been employed to co-write a second feature with the same company, POV Films. Research aiding practice, in particular on theme, is now a part of every project I undertake.

This Masters by Research has introduced me to reflective practice. Reflecting on my work has changed how I go about 'making' and 'creating'. Analysing my work was not part of my practice in the past. It seemed unhelpful, or too intellectual, and while I struggled early on, this project now marks a major turning point in my writing. To think deeply about why I make the choices I make and what effect those choices (both good and bad) have on my work has led me, at least in my own mind, to create more satisfying and meaningful scripts. As an academic and working writer, it is my sincere hope that this research-led project will be of benefit to writers, academics and students who wish to create significant and meaningful stories for the screen.

Chapter One: Exploring theme

1. Why theme matters

For theme to matter, stories need to be important. Writer-director David Mamet believes they are essential, as he outlines in his book *3 Uses of the Knife* (1998).

Children jump around at the end of the day to expend the last of the day's energy. The adult equivalent, when the sun goes down, is to create or witness drama – which is to say, to order the universe into comprehensible form. Our sundown play/film/gossip is the day's last exercise of that survival mechanism. In it we attempt to discharge any residual perceptive energies in order to sleep. We will have our drama in that spot, and if it's not forthcoming we will cobble it together out of nothing (Mamet 1998, p. 10).

Mamet later goes on to say, 'It flatters and it informs our capacity for rational synthesis – our ability to learn a lesson, which is our survival mechanism' (Mamet 1998, p. 10). This punctuates his belief that life is given a form – in order to understand it – via drama and therefore that story is an integral part of who we are.

The notion that we tell and view stories as part of a deep human need is also found in the work of Joseph Campbell, most known in screenwriting circles for his book on mythic story structure, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). In the later book, *The Power of Myth* (1988), a collection of interviews Bill Moyers conducted with Campbell, the following exchange puts it succinctly:

MOYERS: So we tell stories to try to come to terms with the world to harmonise our lives with reality?

CAMPBELL: I think so, yes. Novels – great novels – can be wonderfully instructive (Campbell/Moyers 1988, p. 2).

If stories are this essential to human society, then what part does theme play in their importance and their fabric/telling? Chuck Wendig is a novelist, screenwriter and game designer, and while his work is very much aimed at the mainstream popular market, it is interesting to note that in his book, *The Kick-Ass Writer* (2013), he still cites theme's importance:

Every story's trying to say something. It's trying to beam an *idea*, a *message*, into the minds of the readers. In this way, every story is an argument. It's the writer making a case. It's the writer saying, 'All of life is suffering.' Or, 'Man will be undone by his prideful reach.' Or 'Love blows.' Or, 'If you dance with the Devil Wombat, you get cornholed by the Devil Wombat.' This argument is the story's *theme* (Wendig 2013, p. 157).

Christopher Vogler, author of what has become an industry standard book, *The Writer's Journey*, shares this view:

The theme of a story is an underlying statement or assumption about an aspect of life. Usually it's set out somewhere in Act One, in the Ordinary World. It could be an off hand remark by one of the characters, expressing a belief which is then rigorously tested in the course of the story. The real theme of the piece may not emerge or announce itself until you have worked with the story for a while, but sooner or later you must become aware of it. Knowing the theme is essential to making the final choices in dialogue, action and set dressing that turn a story into a coherent design. In a good story, everything is related somehow to the theme (Vogler 1998, p. 96).

The notion that theme is at the centre of all stories was new to me. In the past I had seen it as something I thought about at the end of a project, or at least a fair

way into its development. And even then it was a very loose concept. It was plot and action that dictated story far more than theme. Now, however, having researched and connected with the idea of theme as a driver of the script development process, I've realised that theme could act as a kind of guiding light from the very beginning of my writing process.

If stories are an important part of being human, and theme is the reason we tell a story, I wanted to explore how I could use theme as the main tool in the creation of *The Golden Breed*. While this would be a difficult, and as my creative reflections will attest, at times a daunting new script development and writing process for me, I was encouraged by an interview Pamela Douglas conducted with showrunner David Milch in her book *Writing The TV Drama Series* (2007).

In the interview, Douglas mentioned finding similar themes in Milch's writing, to which he responded: 'In the way I try to write, the theme is never separate from the character or the plot' (Douglas 2007, p. 28). It interested me to see just how important a part theme plays in every aspect of Milch's work.

Inspired by this notion, I decided that as a way 'into' this project, I would use theme as a driver of the screenplay's development, whereby all the components (initial idea, setting, story, character creation, plot, structure, even individual scenes) would emerge from theme and what I would identify as my thematic concerns as a writer. In his book *The Art of Dramatic Writing* (1942) Lajos Egri – a writer recommended to me by established TV and film producer Gus Howard who believes it is the best book on writing for the stage or screen – stresses the importance of a clear theme being a vital development tool.

No idea, and no situation, was ever strong enough to carry you through to its logical conclusion *without a clear-cut premise*. If you have no such premise, you may modify, elaborate, vary your original idea or situation, or even lead yourself into another situation, but you will not know where you are going. You will flounder, rack your brain to invent further situations to round out your play. You may find these

situations – and you will still be without a play. *You must have a premise* – a premise which will lead you unmistakably to the goal your play hopes to reach (Egri 1942, p. 6).

Though Egri uses the term ‘premise’ for what I am calling ‘theme’ (see below for the definition of theme I will be using) and his book is about writing plays as opposed to a television screenplay, I believe the theory is still valid and workable for *The Golden Breed*. Theme, above all other craft tools, would guide its creation.

2. A clear definition of how ‘theme’ will be used in this dissertation and project

It was important from the outset to clearly define theme in a way that would make it useful as a guiding craft tool. When discussing theme with my peers (supported by the view from McKee below), some use a single word to express it, but this felt too open to be of any use in a clear, practical sense. Because my show is essentially about a family, it would be easy to follow my fellow writers and state this as my theme. However, I wanted to question what might be meant by this single word and how it could be of any concrete help when developing the show/script. Any story or character that impacted the family would be acceptable. As long as the family was involved in any story I thought up, it would be within that single word ‘theme’. This lack of clear boundaries or direction felt unhelpful.

I reflected in my journal at the time, ‘While the single word “theme” can seem like a freeing concept, it has what I see now as an in built problem: if you can say anything, you run the risk of saying nothing.’ To this end, I decided to try and find a more useful definition and discovered it in McKee’s *Story*.

Theme has become a rather vague term in the writer’s vocabulary. ‘Poverty’, ‘war’, and ‘love’, for example are not themes; they relate to setting or genre. A true theme is not a word but a sentence – one clear, coherent sentence that

expresses a story's irreducible meaning. I prefer the phrase *controlling idea*, for like theme, it names a story's root or central idea, but it also implies function: The Controlling Idea shapes the writer's strategic choices. It's yet another *Creative Discipline* to guide your aesthetic choices towards what is appropriate or inappropriate in your story, toward what is expressive of your Controlling Idea and may be kept versus what is irrelevant to it and must be cut' (McKee 1998, pp. 114–115).

What this told me was that in order for theme to be of any use to a writer, it needs to say something clearly. McKee further defines this theory of theme as a craft tool later in the book. 'A CONTROLLING IDEA may be expressed in a single sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence at the beginning to another at the end' (McKee 1998, p. 115).

This clear and craft-based definition will be how I use the term 'theme' in this research investigation. It led to the creation of a clear theme for my project and resulted in what was, personally, a thought-provoking and dynamic new way to develop a script. Reflecting on what this did for me, and my practice, I realised it had shifted my priorities in a profound way. My script, controlled by the theme, would have to express the chosen central message in one way or another at all times; I would not be able to wander off theme for the sake of plot, regardless of how tempting this can be for a writer.

I remember from my time story-editing a soap opera under strict deadlines how seemingly exciting story developments, cut loose from the burden of character credibility and the theme of the show, could seem like the most compelling, not to mention easiest, way to fill the pages of a scene breakdown. The car crash; unexpected illness; secret, unknown parent's sudden arrival; and many other sensationalist plot ideas were very tempting to use, especially when wanting to appease the executives of the network buying the show who almost always went for spectacle that would get publicity. The thing I learnt, time and time again, was that they almost never worked. I now realise why. If the plot idea did

not deal with the show's theme in a real way, it was an idea for a different show. The audience, it seemed, almost instinctively knew what the show was about and would turn off when the creators tried to make it become something it was not supposed to be. When a show forgets what it is, it loses its purpose. Its purpose is its theme.

This new process would insist on more rigorous discipline. While my creative, lateral mind could still wander, it would be within clearly defined boundaries of what was or was not appropriate for the show. I would investigate whether adhering to these boundaries would result in the plot, driven by theme, causing emotional shifts within the characters and through these shifts, they and I hoped the audience would reflect on their own lives and learn something about themselves and the world around them.

In doing this it was my intention, hopefully, to reach a long-desired personal artistic goal: to touch people emotionally while expressing what I feel it means to be human.

Chapter Two: Writers, thinkers and practitioners

1. Current and historical thought on the subject

This chapter details the writers, thinkers and practitioners I discovered while researching how theme might be used as a craft tool, the theories they put forward and how they informed the writing of *The Golden Breed*.

While I read approximately 20 books on the craft of screenwriting – all of which were of some use – very few became key aides in the development of my script, mainly because so few ‘how to write’ books give theme more than cursory consideration. For example, Blake Snyder’s *Save The Cat* (2005), a best selling book on screenwriting, devotes one page to theme. I found this surprising considering most books (Snyder’s included) believe theme is important. It felt like theme informing writing was an underrepresented area in the teaching of screenwriting and this makes it an important chapter in this dissertation and something that makes my research significant as it is filling a gap in the field. Why, if theme matters, are so few discussing how to use it? I will start with an overview of the books discussing theme and conclude with the four key works I used in the writing of my project. I recorded my reactions to many of the books in my creative journal and will reference them at points that I think give insight into my research methodology. The reason that most of these books are in the ‘how to write’ category is that in my experience they are the books most often used and quoted by working writers. They are the works of my professional field.

A brief summary:

Chuck Wendig is a novelist, screenwriter and game designer with published work, including *Blackbirds*, *Mockingbird* and *The Blue Blazes*. His compilation of writing tips, *The Kick-Ass Writer* (2013), includes a chapter consisting of 25 ‘tips’ regarding theme, which was helpful regarding theme’s importance. A clear example finishes his chapter:

Theme is you saying something with your fiction. Why wouldn't you want to say something? Big or small, simple or complex, as profound as you care to make it, fiction has the power to do more than just be a recitation of plot events. Your work becomes your own – fingerprinted in blood – when you capitalize on the power of storytelling to *Speak your heart and soul*. Take a stand. Let the theme be a bold pronouncement of confidence, a message encoded in the DNA of an already-great story (Wendig 2013, p. 164).

Writing is generally a solitary pursuit. There are times when my spirits lag and motivation can become an issue. I wonder if what I am doing has worth, if the amount of time I spend alone at a desk could not be better spent with my family and friends. At such times quotes like Wendig's can be inspiring when spirits lag. His passion for theme's importance helped remind me of the validity of my research and the questions I sought to answer. However, there was less information on how to actually *use* theme to help one write, although if you dug deeply there were some craft tips, such as the following recommendation:

Ask three questions to zero in on your theme: 'What is this story about?', 'Why do I want to tell this story?', 'Why will anyone care?' Three answers. Three beams of light. Illuminating dark spaces. Revealing theme (Wendig 2013, p. 160).

This reminded me that when we write honestly and authentically about things that matter to us, we also touch others. That said, Wendig advises against being too oblique when it comes to theme:

A theme so subtle it's imperceptible does your story no good. It'd be like having a character that just never shows up. Or a two-headed ferret in your pants that you never put up on YouTube. What's the point? (Wendig 2013, p. 160).

This helped guide me to choose a theme that I not only personally believed, but also felt could be conveyed in a clear manner.

Lastly, while not offering substantial craft instructions with regard to how to use theme, Wendig does give tips on what theme *is not*. He does not believe it is a question, such as 'How far will man go for love?' because he believes it is the answer that gives you theme, not the question. He also advises against theme being two things against each other, such as 'man versus nature'. Both of these helped when I was coming up with what my theme would be and how I would express it. I learnt that a vague idea is not a theme. A theme that has a point of view is more use to a writer because it gives direction and outcome – both of which are essential when writing a script.

Eric Edson and his book *The Story Solution* (2011) was yet another book that makes note of theme's importance. Edson devotes two pages to the subject but little space to how it can be used, although his theory that it is most often found in the flaw of the protagonist proved helpful when developing my characters.

Robert McKee's industry standard is *Story* (1998) and his theory of the controlling idea, what I call theme, was also a helpful guide. McKee, as noted in the chapter defining theme, is a strong believer in knowing what your story is about and letting that guide your choice of character, setting and narrative. He was also helpful regarding how to express a theme in a clear sentence. However, like so many of the books I read, his opinion of its importance was not reflected in pages given to its exploration: six solid pages followed by two or three brief mentions after that. It seemed most film screenwriting books followed this pattern. My journal reflects my frustration at this discovery:

Yet another book that insists theme is incredibly important but spends little to no time telling me how it can be used beyond a vague sense of what should and shouldn't be in my script. I'm amazed something so seemingly important gets so little time spent on it. I'm either scratching around in the

wrong field or I have stumbled onto an unexplored under-researched area.

While the majority of books that deal with writing for the screen are film-based, I made a point of seeking out books exclusively dealing with TV writing. They included Alex Epstein's *Crafty TV Writing* (2006). Epstein devoted just over half a page on what he called 'themed shows'. While suggesting theme was not important to Epstein, it did contain the following warning on using theme to help tell stories:

What's neat about a themed show is it can show different perspectives on the same story: one character tries to make up with his or her ex and fails, the other tries differently and succeeds. If juxtaposing the two story lines says something more about the theme, it's worth doing. If you're just making the same point twice, it may be no more than stunt plotting (Epstein 2006, p. 63).

This was instructional for two reasons. Firstly, it reminded me that some respected books on TV writing gave theme little thought, suggesting it is not important. Another example is Pamela Douglas' *Writing The TV Drama Series* (2006), a book filled with useable craft tips that never mentions theme, except in an interview with writer David Milch. It was clear an argument against theme could certainly be mounted. Secondly, that theme is considered by some to be 'pretentious' or 'clever'. I would endeavour to make sure my project was neither of these. I believe that that alienates viewers, when embracing them through the meaning theme gives story is what I want my writing to do.

2. The main sources of inspiration

While all the books I have read had at least some craft value, I settled on five main texts to help develop my project. These were books that went beyond stating theme's importance and, more helpfully, gave clear craft guidelines as to how theme can be *used*.

Sidney Lumet

An acclaimed filmmaker (50 Academy Award nominations), with titles that include *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Network* (1976), *12 Angry Men* (1957) and *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead* (2007), Lumet wrote a book *Making Movies* (1995) that details his work methods and practice. Theme plays a key role in Lumet's filmmaking process and throughout the book he keeps going back to its importance:

I've been talking about why I decided to do a particular movie. Now comes the most important decision I have to make: What is this movie about? I'm not talking about plot, although in certain very good melodramas the plot is *all* they're about. And that's not bad. A good, rousing, scary story can be a hell of a lot of fun. But what is it about emotionally? What is the theme of the movie, the spine, the arc? What does the movie mean to me? Personalizing the movie is very important. I'm going to be working flat out for the next six, nine, twelve months. The picture had better have some meaning to me (Lumet, 1995, p. 10).

Lumet lists what he believes the theme of each of his key films is. In each case they are clear messages he wanted to convey to his audience. For example, the theme for *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) is described as 'Freaks are not the freaks we think they are. We are much more connected to the most outrageous behavior than we know or admit' (Lumet, 1995, p. 14). He also details how theme helps guide him in his artistic choices. His belief in theme and how it can be used to create coherent screen stories that carry a clear message to the viewer was both instructional and highly influential on my script.

Lajos Egri

Playwright and director Lajos Egri wrote about the craft of writing and founded the Egri School of Writing in New York. His most well-known book and the one I will refer to in this dissertation, *The Art Of Dramatic Writing*, has had a

substantial effect on my project. Though he concentrates on theatre and the writing of plays, he also talks about film and TV, though even without doing this I believe his ideas can work as well on the screen as they do on the stage. For example, esteemed film writer/director Woody Allen, who took classes with Egri, believes *The Art of Dramatic Writing* is the best book on the subject (Lax 2000). Australian producer Gus Howard (*Blue Healers, Rain Shadow*) is also a strong supporter of Egri's theories, using them in his Master of Producing course at the Victorian College of the Arts.

As I have noted already, most of the books I have researched stated the importance of theme, but none of them spent more than a few pages detailing this importance. And they had even less to say about how one can use theme to write more compelling stories. Egri, however, believes theme, or as he calls it 'premise', is the single most important tool in creating compelling dramatic writing; he believes it is intimately tied to all other facets of a play's creation.

Without a clear theme, he believes no script will reach its potential:

The author using a badly worded, false, or badly constructed premise finds himself filling space and time with pointless dialogue – even action – and not getting anywhere near the proof of his premise. Why? Because he has no direction (Egri 1947, p. 8).

This suggests theme is not a vague idea but rather a clear usable tool that is essential to good writing. As I will detail in later chapters, *The Art Of Dramatic Writing*, with its clear and straightforward style, informed much of the creation and writing of *The Golden Breed*.

A example would be what Egri believes constitutes a well-conceived thematic statement, as demonstrated in the following quote:

Every good premise is composed of three parts, each of which is essential to a good play. Let us examine '*Frugality*

leads to waste.' The first part of this premise suggests character – a frugal character. The second part, '*leads to*' suggests conflict, and the third part, '*waste*' suggests the end of the play (Egri 1947, p. 8).

This kind of detailed advice informs *how* a theme can inform all areas of the show's creation. Using Egri's theories made it possible to tie theme into every stage and facet of the script's creation. I would know what characters I needed, the world of my show, and even the plot. I could test what would happen when everything serves a single sentence thematic master.

An entry in my reflective journal moments after reading Egri's chapter on theme captures my elation. At the time I was wondering whether the question I had chosen to explore for this Master's was feasible. To be honest, I was full of self-doubt about the validity of my work:

Yes! At last! After weeks of struggling to come up with a theme before I thought about plot and character, I now have a method to work with. I've been meaning to read this book for years and am kicking myself for not doing so sooner. Where others are vague about theme's importance, Egri is precise; where others speak of importance but not how to use theme, Egri is clear and helpful. Combining Egri's craft insights with my idea to go to theme before plot feels like a major breakthrough. Who would have thought the best book on writing for the screen would be one on writing plays from the '40s? I have found my guru! I can see how theme-led storytelling can work and how it can be a whole new way for me to create. I can't wait to share this with my writing partners; I know it's going to change the way we work for the better. To be surrounded by theme is to be surrounded by a heartfelt purpose.

Linda Aronson

Linda Aronson is a playwright, scriptwriter and author of comic novels for young adults, who moved into academia in the late 1990s. She has produced three books of screenwriting theory: *Screenwriting Updated* (2001), *Television Writing* (2004) and *The 21st Century Screenplay* (2010). It is the latter that I found most useful, as it goes beyond the classic hero-led, single protagonist, three-act structure found so often in screenwriting books to investigate the numerous alternative ways a screenplay can be created. As she states on her website:

If, like me, you're interested in writing screenplays and TV scripts that contain flashbacks, time jumps, group stories or use any kind of non-linear narrative, I have some good news. Lose the idea that the conventional, one-hero, chronological 3-act structure screenplay is the only possible form we can use for writing a film or TV scripts, and that story structure is written in stone. Films using flashbacks, flash forwards, non-linear narratives, multiple plots and ensemble casts in group stories (things we can call 'parallel narrative') all follow clear patterns that we can use. Moreover these forms are not on the periphery of screenwriting. They are common in mainstream film, including Academy Award nominations, indeed group stories particularly have been out there forever, never fitting the one-hero-only rule. *The Full Monty* (Peter Cattaneo, 1997) wasn't about one man creating a male striptease show, it was about a group. We watch *The Magnificent Seven* (John Sturges, 1960) not *The Magnificent One*, similarly, the Chekhov play we go to see is about three sisters, and not just one. Just for the record, if we want to go back three thousand years, Homer used flashbacks and multiple protagonists in *Odyssey*, moreover, in much the same way, for the same reasons, and using the same structural mechanics as we can see in films like *Amores*

Perros (Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, 2000) and *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) (Linda Aronson, 2014).

This made me more interested to read the book once I realised *The Golden Breed* would be a multi-protagonist and multi-stranded television show that would also use flashbacks. In particular, her more open approach to different methods of storytelling helped once I started plotting my episode. It felt liberating to have a book that goes beyond the single protagonist mono-myth.

Aronson is a respected and award winning television writer (Australian Writers Guild awards for TV scripts, Banff TV series prize) and an academic; she has been employed by the Australian Film, Television and Radio School, most recently giving masterclasses in February–March 2014, and has given lectures around the world. She is acknowledged by many respected industry professionals, including writer David Williamson: ‘A big advance of the standard texts’; producer Jan Scott: ‘Provides screenwriters with invaluable detailed strategies to lay bare the workings of the craft’; and Christopher Vogler: ‘Comprehensive, precise and extremely practical theory’. Her combination of research-led theories and industry experience gives her work credibility.

Her insights into theme in multi-protagonist stories, like *The Golden Breed*, were instrumental in helping the project be theme-led. An example would be this useful advice from *The 21st Century Screenplay*:

Theme and moral are hugely important in these (multi protagonist) films, and the writing motto here is: ‘same theme, different adventure’, which reminds us that all the various stories have to illustrate the film’s theme in different ways (Aronson 2010, p. 183).

This proved particularly helpful as I knew from early in the development stage that it would be a multi-story script, and being theme-led, that I would need all my stories to be different versions of the same theme. I have worked on multi-stranded, multi-protagonist TV shows and in every case a plot for each separate

story strand came first; sometimes all they had to link them might be that they were different, like one comedy, one romance. However, what Aronson is saying here is that they need to be different sides of the same thematic coin and that doing this will deliver coherence and meaning while also keeping the overall story fresh and compelling. My story's plots would have to be very different from each other.

The importance of theme is repeated throughout Aronson's book. For example:

Theme is the most vital connection in tandem (stories). All tandem narrative films are didactic and have a socio-political theme (sometimes very political, sometimes not) illustrated differently through each separate story. Usually the films are critical of society, and the message is a call for change; in less political films, a change of heart, in more political films, a change of social policy (Aronson 2010, p. 185).

She also writes about how to express theme through story and gives insights into how this may be achieved, all of which act as clear craft guides in the writing of the script. For example, she writes about geography in the following passage:

Events happen in the same time frame and characters often literally walk into and out of each other's stories. Geography and time usually connect characters in the films final moments. In some cases, the final moments are the first time characters from different stories connect, which can provide an interesting and pleasing twist (Aronson 2010, pp. 185–186).

Even before I knew what my story would be, I was inspired by Aronson's approach to theme coming from multiple stories set in the same place, which gave me something to aim for in my narrative. It also got me thinking about the possibility of all the characters meeting up at the end of the first episode. I have

enjoyed this in episodes of *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999–2007). Often that show would end with family dinners or celebrations, most famously the café scene that ended the entire show. I realise now, thanks to Aronson, that what I was enjoying was not so much the stories converging, but the theme. Theme affecting more than one character gives it a universality that I find appealing.

William Rabkin

William Rabkin is a veteran American television showrunner (a writer who acts as executive producer and is in charge of all the creative decisions on a show). His executive producing credits include contemporary shows *Diagnosis Murder* and *Martial Law*. He has written scripts for *Monk*, *Psych* and *The Glades*. He has developed and written a dozen pilots for both cable and network broadcasters. He is also an academic, currently teaching screenwriting at the University of California. I believe he has both academic and professional experience, making him someone whose opinions hold weight.

His book *Writing The Pilot* (2011) is a detailed, craft-based explanation of the essential elements needed to create a compelling TV series. Established television writer Paula Yoo, *The West Wing*, described it on her blog as ‘one of the best books I’ve read on how TV pilots/series are created, and why some TV series work and others fail. I can’t recommend this book enough, especially for TV writers who are interested in working on their own spec pilot script’ (Paula Yoo 2011).

Most valuable for the creation of *The Golden Breed* were Rabkin’s chapters on how the central conflict in your show reveals theme. Theme for Rabkin is paramount: ‘TV is not possible without theme’ (Rabkin 2011, p. 24). His approach for how theme is expressed through conflict, character and the resulting narrative guided much of my work on *The Golden Breed*.

Most screenwriting books deal almost exclusively with film. Staples like McKee’s *Story* and Vogler’s *The Writer’s Journey* make no mention of television, and while they were still helpful, it was refreshing and unique to read theories dealing

with television exclusively. This was particularly evident in his theories on why theme is so important in television. For Rabkin, the longer form of storytelling that TV demands makes theme all the more important. 'It is theme that gives coherence to a set of thirty or fifty or one hundred episodes – it is by definition a unifying idea, and here it's what makes all those separate stories part of one larger whole. It's what keeps the audience watching' (Rabkin 2011, p. 24).

I had not thought of the different levels of theme's importance between film and television but this was an interesting insight. It makes sense that the longer you're telling a story, the clearer the theme needs to be. It's what unifies a show. I suddenly realised that often when I felt a show had changed or gone off the rails, what was actually happening was they had strayed from the theme. The book deals with how (led by theme) one constructs a pilot script for an original new television show and it provided valuable insights at each stage of the development of *The Golden Breed*.

John Yorke

John Yorke is the managing director of Company Pictures in the UK and has developed such acclaimed series as *Skins*, *Shameless* and *The White Queen*. Passionate about the craft of writing, in 2005 he set up the BBC Writers Academy, the first writing course in Britain to guarantee broadcast work. A number of my friends and peers, including writers Sarah Dollard, *Being Human*, and Peter Mattessi, *EastEnders*, attended this course and noted the positive impact it had on their writing.

In 2013 Yorke entered the world of screenwriting authors with his book *Into The Woods* (2013). It is an exhaustive study of the importance of structure in all stories, focusing on TV and film in particular. Like Campbell before him, Yorke believes the structure we use to tell stories is ancient. In his introduction, he argues:

Storytelling has a shape. It dominates the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but

to the very beginnings of the recorded word. It's a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it's a shape that may be – though we must be careful – a universal archetype (Yorke 2013, p. xi).

However, while it is not a new area of thought or research, where Yorke is mining new territory is that he's interested not so much in *how* we can use structure but *why* we use it. As he puts it himself:

What started as a basic exploration of screenwriting morphed slowly into a historical, philosophical, scientific and psychological journey to the heart of all storytelling, and – in turn – to the realization that dramatic structure is not a construct, but a product of human psychology, biology and physics (Yorke 2013, p. xiv).

With Yorke, I found another screenplay analyst who believes stories are part of what it is to be human. While this was further evidence of story's importance, it also inspired the writing of this dissertation: the theory that research, if it's permitted to, can lead to unexpected places.

While Yorke's theories on structure and why and how we should use it were certainly useful in the plotting of *The Golden Breed*, it was his belief that theme is of equal importance that tied him into my research question, in particular his theory that stories are arguments. Yorke quotes WB Yeats to suggest theme emerges from deep within us: 'Out of our quarrel with others we make rhetoric; out of the quarrel with ourselves we make poetry' (Yorke, 2013 p. 190). He expands on this notion of theme as argument in his chapter on the subject:

Stories work exactly like essays, like lawsuits and, indeed, like perception itself: they posit an idea, explore it, then come to a conclusion that, if the drama is convincing, it is proved true (Yorke 2013 p. 192).

This influenced me to ensure I fought for and against my theme for *The Golden Breed*. I realised that too often in the past I had not given any credence to the point of view of my antagonist. I can see now how that made for a less dynamic story. How theme as an argument plays out in a story is illustrated throughout the book in a way that clearly demonstrates how it can be used as a craft tool. The following quote discussing the film *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and its argument-based theme 'Can men and woman just be friends?' is a helpful example:

Look at the relationship between a screenplay's inciting incident and its worst point – it is here that you will find the theme played out. Harry and Sally try to be friends, and at the crisis they find themselves in total misery. Macbeth kills a king and at the end of Act IV finds himself (though he is incapable of perceiving it) in a similar situation. As we've already noted, the inciting incident asks the question 'what are the consequences of *this*?' And the worst point provides the answer – but it is the *writer's* answer ... The relationship between inciting incident and crisis is thus the theme in action. Theme is a writer's interpretation of life (Yorke 2013, p. 193).

These clear examples of how theme is both expressed and how it can be used as a workable writing tool to create compelling, meaningful stories informed much of *The Golden Breed*. By digesting, analysing and then starting to test how the theories of these five authors might be used, I realised I had enough guidance to start my project.

Chapter Three: From macro to micro – how research led to the creation of the project

This chapter explains how I used theme to work from the macro, my concept, through character creation, narrative construction and, finally, the micro of scene writing. It is how theme informed the big picture of ideas down to the small craft considerations of each line of action and dialogue.

1. Concept and theme

At first the theory of using theme as a guiding craft principle seemed like a relatively achievable goal: use McKee's definition to find a single sentence that expresses the theme of a TV show I'd like to write and start developing the script. This, however, on a number of levels, proved far more difficult to put into practice. As Wendig somewhat crudely advises in *The Kick-Arse Writer*:

I make it sound easy. Like you can just state a theme or find it tucked away in your story like a mint on a pillow. It isn't. Theme is slippery, uncertain. It's like a lubed-up sex gimp: every time you think you get your hands around him the greasy latex-enveloped sonofabitch is out of the cage and free from your grip and running into traffic where he's trying desperately to unzipper his mouth and scream for help. Be advised: theme is tricky (Wendig 2013, p. 159).

Here, Wendig is talking about the difficulty of finding a theme when writing in the more conventional manner; having at least a vague idea of the story, world, characters and genre – all of which can help suggest thematic content. The difficulty I experienced, at least initially, felt greater mainly because I had to find the theme *before* I started any of my development work. It quickly became very clear how far away this was from my usual process. Even Egri, the great champion of theme, knows most stories do not come from theme first, as he explains when he says, 'Playwrights usually get an idea, or are struck by an unusual situation and decide to write a play around it' (Egri 1942, p. 6).

This had been my experience in the past. In fact, the earliest stages of developing a script were the most 'free' – a time before the burden of craft. My usual writer's instinct was to forget rules and let my creative, lateral mind go to characters, stories and situations that interested me; to let the story/situation/character dictate the theme, often only really 'finding' the theme in the second draft once I had time to get a sense of what I might be saying. The dilemma I now faced was twofold. How, exactly, would I find a theme? And once found, how would story come from this theme?

Egri proved helpful at this early stage. He believes one of the most important aspects of the chosen theme is that the writer must passionately believe in it. To illustrate this he lists a number of sound and very clear themes, any one of which would seem to be the basis for a compelling screen story. However, he makes it clear something is missing. 'The author's conviction is missing. Until he takes sides, there is no play. Only when he champions one side of the issue does the premise spring to life' (Egri 1942, p. 9). The message was clear: I must find a theme that I believed in.

It was at this point in the process that my journey felt like it had truly begun.

If I were to let *The Golden Breed* embody what I as a human being felt about the world, then I wanted to begin by setting about examining what matters to me, identifying it in a clear manner and then finding what kind of story might spring from this process. I set myself small thematic tasks, such as listing what makes me angry, happy or scared, and writing down ten of those things and seeing which gave me ideas for stories. Another one was reading the newspaper and seeing if I could put a theme to each story that grabbed my attention. I did the same with the books that have touched me most deeply. I then looked at my life's story and wondered if certain moments of change or catharsis had some kind of thematic content.

Of course they all did, which got me thinking that identifying the themes of my life is an important step to take as a writer. It may be what obsesses you and

obsession helps motivate you when staring at the blank screen. These tasks were revelatory on many levels, the most profound being that my story would be coming from an emotional conviction, whereas in the past what first attracted me to a story was more an intellectual process. Was it clever? Did it have interesting twists and turns? Was it fresh and exciting? Now, however, I would be searching for something that resonated deeper within me and this caused a distinct shift in my relationship to a story. I would tell a tale based on what I felt was a truth about the human condition. Story became emotion-based, rather than a flight of fancy. I asked myself: What do I care about? What do I want to say? What do I feel? Letting these questions guide me led to the discovery of my theme and a new way of working.

Along with the little tasks I gave myself, the seed of what would become the theme of my project revealed itself while I researched why stories are so important to us. I was led to the aforementioned interviews in *The Power Of Myth* and was particularly taken with a passage where Campbell talks about Thomas Mann's novel *Tonio Kroger*:

... and then he (Mann) says, 'The writer must be true to truth.' And that's a killer, because the only way to describe a human being truly is by describing his imperfections. The perfect human being is uninteresting – the Buddah who leaves the world, you know. It is the imperfections of life that are loveable (Campbell 1988, p. 3).

The idea that imperfection is unlovable caused a deep emotional response within me. It was interesting to note that this came without any sense of a narrative or story situation. It was instead just an idea, a feeling that set me thinking. If writing, as so much of my research suggested, is about expressing an idea the writer has about life, then my theme needed to be true to me; something I deeply felt. At this moment I believe I found it: the very human obsession with perfection, how this leads to the creation of false masks to hide the flaws we don't want others to see and the resulting inauthentic life.

This way of thinking and making, brought on by the research, was a profound shift in my creative practice. Rather than clambering for story, I was freely associating ideas about life. Things I'd read in the past, framed by the loose thematic idea I had chosen, started coming back to me and had me going back to look at them with fresh eyes. One such search took me to Laurie Hutzler's theories on character creation (which I will revisit in more detail in the chapter on character).

Hutzler, in her book *The Character Map* (2006), believes we create masks to hide our fears and that ultimately this proves very damaging. Until we have the courage to accept who we really are we won't be able to truly connect to others. The following passage from her chapter on masks was particularly illuminating:

The character's Mask is the false face (or false self) the character wears or projects in public. It is the character's protective outer shell. The character uses this image to hide, deny, camouflage or 'mask' his or her greatest fear. It is the character 'game face' in facing the difficulties of the world. If the character refuses to let go of the mask he or she becomes the mask and falls to the Dark Side (and is doomed to be forever driven and tormented by his or her fears) (Hutzler, 2006, p. 15).

Another moment that illustrated the benefits of this new way of writing came during my research practice class. We were put into groups and told to pitch our project (not the research question, but the creative project). Normally in this situation I'd give a brief pitch of the story I was going to tell, but working under my new method resulted in a discussion about perfection: a looser more philosophical discourse. A fellow student said it reminded him of a sociology book he had read by Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In itself this was an unusual moment. Generally, when I as a writer talk story, the feedback I get is about similar films/TV shows/plays/novels, but now, because we were talking ideas, the feedback was of a completely different nature.

I found discussion was more about personal experiences of the burden of perfection or, as in this case, left-of-centre books that could help me in the writing of *The Golden Breed*. I instantly ordered the book and it proved a valuable tool in the creation of the show. Goffman's basic idea is that one can analyse social encounters from the perspective of them being a dramatic performance. In effect, that people understand the 'play' they are in, in most situations, and perform the role required of them as deemed appropriate by the social norms of their particular clan. Reading books like this during the development period of a TV show was completely new to me in my professional experience, but it suddenly felt very natural. I realised the conversations you have with potential collaborators are very different when discussing a theme as opposed to a story idea. Discussing theme is more personal and emotional and I can see that in some situations, especially in early development, it can be more helpful to approach writing in this manner.

Now that I knew my theme would be based around obsessive perfectionism, I searched for a way to express it in a single sentence and here there were a few schools of thought. I first tried to use McKee's previously noted definition of a theme where, in a single sentence, one describes how and why life undergoes change from one type of existence at the start of a story to another at the end. McKee, by way of example, uses what he believes the theme of *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) is: 'Justice triumphs when the law is prepared to be more brutal than the criminal'. This clearly sums up the kind of film *Dirty Harry* is. You know it won't be about finding clues and solving puzzles. It's going to be about being crazier than the psychopath you're after. Giving thought to my theme, I knew it would have to describe one state and how it transforms to another. I had one mental state – obsessive perfectionism – but needed to think about another. Interestingly, almost the moment I started looking for this other emotional state the Campbell quote that perfection is unlovable came back to me and this soon led to the following single sentence thematic statement:

True love surrounds us when we give up our pursuit for perfection and accept ourselves as flawed human beings.

This seemed to fit McKee's definition. I could sense the destination of the story – one that would be upbeat. I could sense what my characters, whoever they ended up being, would have to overcome to achieve this positive outcome. I found an alternate way to phrase a theme in *The Art of Dramatic Writing*:

Every good premise (theme) is composed of three parts, each of which is essential to a good play. Let us examine '*Frugality leads to waste.*' The first part of this premise suggests character – a frugal character. The second part, '*leads to*', suggests conflict, and the third part, '*waste*' suggests the end of the play (Egri 1942, p. 8).

Using this as the template, I came up with:

Obsessive perfectionism leads to isolation.

It was interesting to compare the two: one more detailed, McKee; one more simple and direct, Egri. One hinted at a happy ending; the other had more inbuilt conflict. I thought about how I could use Egri's method to express the same flaw yet with a more upbeat destination, but that proved difficult. After some time, trying out various ways of putting it, I came up with:

Obsessive perfectionism leads to destructive isolation; having the courage to accept and admit who we truly are leads to connection.

While I would continue to refine and work on the best way to express it, I knew I had a clear theme I could use as a tool to inform all the stages of my show and script's development. The creative work, led by this guiding thematic force, could now begin. I felt like I was in a very new mental and emotional state as a writer. I knew what I was going to talk about. Furthermore, I knew what I was going to argue with my story, and all of this without a single clue as to what that story would be about.

Finding the story

To help find the story, I used a technique from Ellen Sandler's book, *The TV Writer's Workbook* (Sandler, 2007). Sandler argues that good writing should come from stories with which a writer has a powerful emotional connection – yet another thinker suggesting a writer's connection to feelings are important. To help find this connection, she has a simple but effective writer's game. On a blank piece of paper you write the emotion (in my case 'perfectionism') and then, without any self-editing, you free-associate whatever comes into your mind, being led by this single emotional state. She calls this 'mining your life for stories' and it is how I came up with the subject matter for *The Golden Breed*.

Staring at the word on a blank page gave me a sudden flashback to a moment from my childhood. I found myself writing 'last year's bathers'. I was ten or so, at a pool party in the upper middle class suburb I grew up in, and a girl my age is screaming at her mother – the mum had brought 'last year's bathers' to the party and this greatly distressed her. I don't know why I went to this moment first but I noted with interest that this had stuck within my subconscious down through these years and using my new method of development had brought it back to the conscious mind.

From this momentary flash came the seed of the idea for *The Golden Breed*. But rather than being a flash with no concrete meaning, this new way of writing meant it came wrapped in a very usable guise. It felt like every thought I now had had meaning and a purpose. Every thought had direction. It was either on theme and could be considered or it wasn't and could be happily discarded. I thought about the world and the people of that incident at the pool and remembered it was at the house of a very interesting family that my family knew back then. The father was an SP bookie – an illegal bookmaker. They were a larger-than-life family: in many ways the social hub of the suburb. They seemed like a great launching point for a story. Guided by my theme, things started to fall into place.

I wondered whether the show could be set in the 1980s. Doing research on this era I discovered it was the start of the credit boom: people living beyond their means so they could have better cars, clothes, etc. The father's profession felt on

theme as well; it's all about accuracy. If a horse wins you make a fortune, it loses and you risk losing everything – and the difference between the two is mere centimetres. Getting it right takes an incredible amount of skill and insight – a near-obsessive eye for facts, figures and percentages (and all the while keeping up a cool, calm, affable appearance to attract and keep your clientele). All of this seemed to tie in with obsessive perfectionism and masks. Coming at finding a story from this angle was really working. My creative journal captures this moment:

I have found a world and a family on which to base my story. And the thing that has really struck me is that I don't feel I would have ever arrived at this point without using theme as the motivating force. It has felt like a completely different process, like a rewriting of the mind. I'm excited to think a world I know so well can help sell a theme I feel passionately about. It feels really grounded in my world experience and certainly I am experiencing an emotional connection to the story I haven't felt at a similar stage on previous projects.

The root of the story was in place. I had a time, a place and potential subject matter: a family with a criminal father who inhabited an upper middle class nouveau riche suburb in the 1980s. It was time to move on to the character development.

2. Character and theme

My decision to develop character informed by theme, before developing the narrative, was a result of the understandings I had gleaned from research, in particular Egri and Rabkin. Both of these theorists elevate theme above all other considerations and both have clear craft guidelines that demonstrate where and how theme can help in the creation of character. Egri believes character informed by theme comes before plot. He believes this strongly enough to devote an entire chapter to arguing this point, his views on this being evident in such statements as:

If any man, inspired or not, builds on character, he is going in the right direction and is employing the right principle, consciously or otherwise. Every great literary work grew from character, even if the author planned the action first. As soon as his characters were created they took precedence and the action had to be reshaped to suit them (Egri 1942, p. 94).

While Egri is clear that character comes first, one can find sound arguments against being character-led. McKee, for example, tell us in his chapter on structure and character in *Story*: 'We cannot ask which is more important, structure or character, because structure *is* character, character *is* structure. They're the same thing and therefore one cannot be more important than the other' (McKee 1999, p. 100). McKee is telling us that if one plots a character doing something then that is 'who that character is'; if he or she does something wildly contradictory in the next scene this merely means they are a contradictory person. One can certainly work on a plot with twists and turns and have a character do anything that will serve the plot, and then at the story's end we will judge the character based on the sum of their actions good, bad or otherwise.

However, for *The Golden Breed*, I wanted to avoid plotting the story for as long as possible to see what effect this would have on my writing. As outlined in the introduction, my prior experience in the industry tended towards the opposite of this methodology, where plot was valued more highly than other considerations, so trying a new approach seemed valid. I would develop my characters to serve my theme and only after I felt I knew my characters inside out would I begin finding the right story in which to place them to explore the theme.

Rabkin was also a major influence in this 'theme/character first' decision. In his chapter titled 'The Conflict' he argues that all great TV shows have two types of conflict. The first he calls 'the surface conflict'. This conflict gives a show its premise. The example he uses to illustrate a clear surface conflict is *Buffy The*

Vampire Slayer (Joss Whedon, 1997–2003). The surface conflict for this show is obvious: Buffy must destroy supernatural beings or risk the world being overrun by monsters. Though an essential part of any successful TV show, Rabkin believes that the surface premise is not what will keep viewers coming back week after week. Rabkin believes a show must have a deeper more human ‘central conflict’, and this central conflict gives the show its theme. While Rabkin acknowledges that the central conflict can come from outside the protagonists of the show, for example *Nip/Tuck* and its theme about how far people will go to achieve physical beauty, he strongly advises finding the theme within the show’s leading characters. He states this view clearly near the chapter’s end:

Nip/Tuck is that rare example of a series with a flawed central conflict that actually managed to work. If we were talking about architecture, we could probably find the occasional successful building that has a deeply flawed foundation. But don’t let the fact that a handful of extremely talented artists have managed to pull this off fool you into thinking you don’t need a strong central conflict located in your protagonist that can power one hundred stories (Rabkin 2011, p. 29).

On looking back at my journal, I found that during the development of my TV show, I declared:

The obsessive need for perfection will come from within each member of my family and it will be this central conflict that will drive every story in *The Golden Breed*. They think they need to be perfect to connect but ironically this is exactly what keeps them from finding true connection with each other.

Surprisingly, making this decision did not feel like a straightjacket hampering creativity, but rather a guiding light. There could be any number of stories I could tell to examine the family’s obsessive perfection, but now I knew each

story would be on track and carry a deeper thematic meaning. It was giving me direction and purpose. However, my story was still a long way off and I needed to find out who my characters really were.

To turn to Egri again, he believes there are three things you must know about a character: their physical make-up, their social make-up and their psychological make-up. He calls this the 'bone structure' or what someone looks like, what kind of world they grow up in and how they feel about it. It is who they are. According to Egri, if a writer knows this, not only will they know how their character will act in any given situation, their character should suggest what the story should be.

Thinking deeply about my characters' backstories and psychological make-up with only theme and world to guide me was an illuminating experience. Freed from the burden of plot, I looked instead to where they had come from. Where were the parents born? What were their childhoods like? What had happened to them to shape their attitudes? I started noting little biographical details of my fictional family. I also started talking to colleagues and friends about the theme, hoping to get thematic-related insights that could lead to fleshing out my characters' strengths, fears and flaws, which would hopefully lead to them being written with more authenticity. I was interested to note that using the theme to start a conversation almost always sparked heartfelt and very personal admissions from the people I was talking to. An example was an older female friend. With the theme in her mind she remembered going to a family party at 15. She was dressed up like an adult for the first time and the strongest memory she had of that night was feeling the eyes of every man in the room upon her. She described it as feeling like both a new power and a burden. This was an insightful female perspective, one I would have missed if not for my process being theme-led. I decided to use this for the mother of my fictional family. I started to really feel how it's the theme of a story that resonates with people and that it leads to contemplation of their own lives and stories. If my show could stay on theme, I hoped it could give this sense of contemplation and insight to an audience.

With obsessive perfectionism always front and centre, I set about giving my family names, a sociological backstory, physical features and psychological profiles. I wrote pages and pages of detail until I got to the point that I felt I could accurately and authentically know, as a writer, exactly how they would react to any given situation. This included a deeper understanding of what would bring them joy and what would make them scared.

Finally, drawing on the work of Laurie Hutzler, I distilled this knowledge to a single driving force for each character. This is something I would never have done had I not used the thematic approach. Hutzler believes we must know what the single clearest force is that drives a character. Is it power, lust, control or greed? In my case it would be a force derived by the thematic obsession with perfection. For father, Peter, it would be the need to be in control; for mother, Judy, the need to be loved and for the son, Paul, the need to be the best. The value of the driving force is that when a writer finally comes to plot their story, the character will be telling them what it must be about. If a man is obsessed with control he must be tested by the unknown, by chaos. I knew enough about my characters to begin plotting the show.

I had never before felt so ready to tell a story. I knew what I wanted to say, had a world, characters and situation that would help tell it. I was confident that the groundwork, led by theme that informed character, would make plotting the show and writing the resulting script both easier and more meaningful.

3. Narrative and theme

With a couple of months of thematic groundwork laid it was time to commence plotting. There are numerous craft principles I use to help devise plot. Five-act narrative structure, as detailed in Yoke's *Into The Woods*, is a strong structural guide. I like to give characters clear active goals, tangible goals, something Sandler details in *The TV Writer's Handbook*, as it makes the characters active and makes it easier finding obstacles to the goals and finding conflict. However, rather than detail these, I will instead concentrate on how these craft principles were informed by theme.

My first task was to decide how I would introduce my characters and what their stories should be in the pilot episode. On instinct I decided almost immediately to make the show multi-stranded: multiple stories with multiple protagonists in each episode. Not only is this the style of plotting I'm most used to in my professional life, it is also the method used by what I personally believe are the best TV shows of the last decade or so. *The Sopranos*, *Mad Men*, *In Treatment* and *Breaking Bad* are all multi-stranded shows. However, having set myself the task of looping all major creative decisions back to theme, I thought about whether or not this decision was in fact most suited to exploring my theme.

Once again, by making theme the driver of all craft decisions, I soon realised it was suitable. A single story, single protagonist show could certainly explore the theme, but having more than one story could show the different ways obsessive perfectionism could affect a family. Being able to illustrate the theme from multiple angles would make a more satisfying and deeper statement. I would have a major story for each of my family members in every episode and this would be set up in the pilot.

Remembering Rabkin's theory of surface and central conflict, I decided that the police cracking down on Peter's illegal betting empire would give the show enough surface high stakes and make the show more commercial – much like crime in *The Sopranos* and advertising in *Mad Men*. The police closing in on Peter was created to directly challenge his driving force to be in control, which would be thematically linked to his obsessive perfectionism. Theme being first had once again provided a clear path for story.

However, I soon realised the police story would mainly involve Peter and therefore realised that I needed to find a surface conflict that could involve mother Judy and son Paul. Both were intrinsically linked to the theme. For Judy, a new, younger rival for her status as centre of the suburb's social scene would arrive. For Paul, a genuine loving relationship with a much more honest and slightly older girl might be a useful device to test his obsession with being the best.

Plotting out the major season long arcs proved far easier when I knew, thanks to theme's honing influence, what my characters' driving forces and thus greatest fears were. The theme and character groundwork enabled me to 'listen' to my characters: it was almost as if they told me the stories that needed to be told. While being able to come up with a lot of story under pressure has always been a skill I've had, it felt different now; when a clear theme leads to the creation of characters that reflect and can carry what it wants to say, story comes to you in a more immediate and meaningful manner. Upon reflection, it was theme's ability to tie ideas together and thus make them feel more substantial.

Eric Edson believes that theme, story and character are intrinsically linked.

Myths hold meaning. And screenwriters must know how meaning gets conveyed in a movie. The message inside a myth is called the 'theme' and in any story theme can most often be found within the human frailties of the hero. When a writer constructs some fictional hero to face a daunting journey, she builds into this character a personal flaw or failing. Then along the way, while the character struggles to overcome this shortcoming in order to achieve her story goal, the theme of the film emerges. Whether it's a big action extravaganza or a small exploration of a relationship, what your hero learns about how to improve his own inner emotional life will be the gift of significance presented to the audience (Edson 2011, p. 6).

His clear advice to my story from character flaws that derive from theme proved helpful with the plotting of *The Golden Breed*. I had created characters with a driving force, fears and flaws that related directly to the theme. I now went about thinking of stories that could put these character traits under pressure. This was by far the easiest plotting experience I have had thanks to the direction theme had given me. My journal captures this feeling:

In the past, when plotting, a story could be just about anything; it just had to be exciting, interesting, filled with twists and turns. This seemingly limitless scope often resulted in unfocused or emotionally unsatisfying stories. Now my mind is confined to a much clearer path. If Peter has to be in control, which leads to a fear of chaos, which expresses his character's obsessive perfectionism, what I need to do is make staying in control harder for him. I know now exactly what my story goal needs to be. I know now when my story will have the correct thematic weight. Theme creates the character and the character traits dictate the story. This feels like the natural order of storytelling and I can't help but wonder how much better the shows I have worked on in the past, including the ones I developed from the ground up, would have been if this order was used to guide us.

I decided that in the pilot episode, each member of the family would have their driving force threatened. And while they would overcome the challenge, it would be clear what they feared most, which would suggest the theme and thus, when the pressure on them increased with each episode, we would understand what the emotional stakes were. In order to understand this, I will offer an example from the character of Judy and how I plotted her story for the pilot episode.

For mother, Judy, whose driving force is to be loved and to be the centre of attention, I thought about a pilot episode story where one of her tennis friends wants to hold the post-match drinks at her house, thus robbing Judy of her (theme and character-linked) need to always have the party around her bar, where she holds court like a queen. To fight against the party being shifted, Judy takes her friends away from the tennis match and her rival's home on a wild adventure to investigate a massive new mansion that has just been built. While Judy achieves her goal of reminding the girls just who is the most fun to be around, thus retaining the love and being the centre of attention, she also

realises that the new mansion, or more accurately its new owner, poses a very real threat to her superiority.

This is an example of what Egri calls foreshadowing conflict (Egri 1942, p. 188). When we know what scares a character, we can sense the trouble to come if a story will clearly be pricking that fear, a key ingredient in keeping a viewer's interest.

I have felt the power of this in *The Sopranos* and now realise it came from theme-informed characters and story that tests them. In *The Sopranos*, we know Tony is a brutal alpha-male who fears any man bettering him, so in the episode when brother-in-law Bobby beats Tony in a fight, we know the consequence for Bobby will be severe. Because we are aware of the emotional stakes, from the moment he beats Tony, we dread what's coming next. The conflict, coming directly from a character flaw that supports the theme, expertly foreshadows conflict. While I once saw this as some kind of storytelling magic, one I have found lacking in much of our local content, my research has enabled me to see how this deep emotional response has been achieved and therefore how it may be built into my own writing. What was once an elusive goal now seems far more tangible. This is not to say it is easy – no great art is – but it feels at least like some kind of path can be made out to help guide me to creating the kind of work I have always wanted to write.

4. Scene writing and theme

In this section I will detail how theme was used to write scenes in *The Golden Breed*. I will do this by focusing on the writing of two scenes as a way to explain my method of practice. One of the most satisfying elements of this project was discovering that theme-led writing worked not only at the macro ideas and conceptual stage of a project, but was just as useful at the script's most micro level. Not just writing the scene but every moment within that scene was aided by theme being the driving force.

I will examine the evolution of the opening two scenes of the script. Scene one is what some would call an establishing shot that introduces us to the world of the show and scene two is a tennis match that introduces our central characters, the Gold family. While scene two is a key scene and an obvious choice to investigate, I also feel scene one is a good example of how even the seemingly smallest detail in a script emerged as a result of the focus on theme. I will include the scene below then pull it apart and explain how and why I wrote it.

Example:

SCENE 1. EXT. MOUNTIE STREET - NIGHT

SUPER: THE MOUNT. LATE FEBRUARY, 1984

A dirt road. The tail end of a sunset. Cicadas chirp and the odd dog barks. No street lights out here. This suburb is semirural. Generous blocks. Large houses. Not mansions — no ornate fences, or uptight manicured gardens — but certainly the world of the upper-middle class. These people are well off. This is The Mount. A sports car, BMW 3 series, roars up the road. It skids to a halt out the front of a house: the Gold residence — tasteful, mid-century modern. Dust rises like fog and hangs in the air. Floodlights come on illuminating the Gold's tennis court. The red clay glows. The only light around. Everything is still and beautiful, almost eerie.

Driven by a theme that deals with the cost of obsessive perfectionism, I wanted to show the opulence of the world but also that all is not well. I sought to juxtapose beauty with a sense of unease. A dirt road is our first image — it represents imperfection, as does much of the following description. This world is wealthy but untamed, and not manicured. I wanted to show the struggle between perfection and imperfection. Every word of this opening description was coming directly from theme. When the car skids to a halt and we are introduced to the beautiful home of our family, I decided to add the dust coming

off an imperfect road covering the house like fog; once again the image represents the 'argument' of my show. A detail like this was driven entirely by the theme.

Blake Snyder argues the importance of opening images in his book *Save The Cat*: 'The very first impression of what a movie is – its tone, its mood, the type and scope of the film – are all found in the opening image' (Snyder 2005, p. 72). If theme is what the movie is about then this first image needed to be theme-related. Keeping this in mind as I wrote informed the image I chose more than anything else. In fact, it was driving me to imagine the images I needed to show the thematic struggle.

Having the tennis court lights come on and illuminating the home was a way of showing that the family was the centre of the suburb, that they are the source of light, which again relates to the fact they start the show having won this position of perfection, and the story will be about them fighting to hold onto it. It is beautiful but it is eerie – perfection and imperfection in constant struggle. I may well have started a story set in this world with a similar establishing shot. However, I would never have made the road dirt, I would never have thought to use the lights from the tennis court and I certainly would not have used the fog-like dust to obscure the beauty were it not for theme driving my writing choices. I also believe I came to make these creative decisions more quickly than I normally would. I had to be just as creative but I had the distinct advantage of theme's ability to hone thoughts. At all times I had imperfection and perfection in my mind and I was mulling over ways to show this.

In the past I would have been thinking of what was clever, what was bold and brash and stylish and, while these things still matter, I now feel that they are meaningless without serving a story. And serving the story to me now means serving the theme. I had a powerful new craft tool that I could use as I wrote and when I looked over a scene to see what I could improve, rather than 'Is this the best image?' I now had 'Is this the best way to express theme?' – a major shift in artistic priorities.

The tennis court scene is a more complex scene as it has action and conflict and introduces the main characters.

Example:

SCENE 2. EXT. GOLD TENNIS COURT – NIGHT

A match is in play. The crux of the game. Silence. An unseen ball bounces. PAUL GOLD (17) – our main guy, confident, good looking; a teenager any parent would be proud of; dressed like McEnroe with headband and wristbands – waits to return serve. Wet with sweat, he shifts from side to side, fidgets, taps and spins his racket. The kid's all over the shop, but he's alive.

Paul's mother, JUDY (45) – radiant, relaxed, warm; the best-looking woman here or anywhere else in the suburb – sits in the centre of a growing crowd that includes 'THE GIRLS' – NOLA (39), SANDY (42) and LYNN (45) – a couple of their husbands, and a handful of their kids of varying ages. Judy catches Paul's eye: winks. Then they both look to the other end of the court. Towards ...

... father and husband, PETER GOLD (50) – charismatic alpha male; the silver fox – as he prepares to serve. Peter bounces the ball evenly. No sweat. He's Ken Rosewall, all style, and grace and calculated precision. He looks to his son. Tosses the ball and serves in one fluid, effortless movement. Paul thinks he's read his dad's intentions and moves to his backhand in anticipation. Peter spots it and in the millisecond before he connects racket to ball, he alters the trajectory. Paul's wrong-footed, forced to fling himself in the opposite direction to make the return. A mess of arms and legs, but he makes the shot. Just. Only he has no control over the ball's placement. Peter reads it

beautifully and produces an effortless drop shot, the ball barely skimming the net. Paul has to scramble from the baseline. He shouldn't make it, crazy to try, but sheer will gets him there. He skids, barely makes the shot, falling as he does. Open mouths in the crowd. Nola overbalances on her chair as she reaches for her wine glass. She rights herself without anyone noticing. Peter hits what will surely be the winner. An easy shot over Paul's crumpled body. But, in a final act of pure teenage madness, Paul launches himself at the ball. For a moment he's flying. It's both insane and admirable – sweet youth – and he makes the volley.

The ball sails to Peter's end of the court. Silence breaks. The crowd erupts, applauding an incredible effort. Paul hits the deck with a thud. Then he raises his hands in victory. Judy basks in the reflected glory. Peter holds up his racket: *not so fast*. Peter walks slowly back to the end of the court, his eyes never leaving the spot where the ball's hit. He crouches down for closer inspection. The gravel markings prove the ball is out – missed by mere millimetres, but out nonetheless. Peter looks to Paul – covered in clay, bloodied, his face full of promise – and back to the marking. Does he lie and let the kid win? That's what most dads would do: reward the effort. Finally, Peter stands and turns to his son.

PETER

Out.

No free rides in Peter's world.

From the moment I thought about what the opening scene would be, I knew, thanks to theme, that I needed to set up a few very important factors. Most

importantly, I needed to somehow express the family's obsession with perfection. I decided to do this by devising a situation that externalised the driving force of each character. Much like the first image in a script is important, the first time we introduce a character is also a key moment. I also had to give a sense of what the central conflict of the show would be while introducing the social world of the show.

I always knew tennis would be a part of the show in one way or another as it was a large part of the social world at the time; however, I realised it would be a strong, action-based way to introduce the theme through the actions of characters. I thought about how the way someone plays a game can tell us a lot about who they are. In my character work I had decided that the main reason Paul's driving force was to be the best at all costs comes from his alpha male father. This, coupled with Peter's driving force being control, instantly gave me an image of what these two men would look like when playing tennis. I therefore decided to pit son against father.

The first time we see Paul, we quickly pick up how important this is to him – this isn't just a casual social game. He really wants to win. He's sweating, fidgeting and nervous. Peter, though just as keen to win, is calm and measured – suggesting his controlling nature. I knew I could show this with visuals, no dialogue needed, which seemed the quickest way to give the viewer a mental snapshot of who each character was. As Judy's driving force is to be loved and the centre of attention, I decided to make the game a public spectacle, so the first time we see Judy she is surrounded by people: a queen holding court. Once again, every single image came from theme. Even minor things like one of the girls losing her balance from too much to drink came to me thanks to theme. It's a slip up, quickly covered: an imperfection desperately hidden before anyone notices.

As Paul practically kills himself to win the game, we see that he is more than merely a spirited young man – it is desperate and a little sad. Paul suffers under a huge burden; future conflict is foreshadowed. With Peter, I racked my brain to find the best way to express obsessive control. Theme had led me to make Peter

an SP bookie, and research into that world revealed that houses were won and lost on the tiniest of margins. A nose one way or the other could mean great financial victory or ruin. This gave me the idea of the ball being out by the smallest of margins. It meant Peter had a choice to make and it was a choice that could tell us a great deal about who he is. When he makes the decision, he kills a little of his humanity. It seemed like a strong way to imply what the cost and therefore the stakes are of obsessive perfectionism. The scene felt dynamic and rich.

I have shown this scene to several of my screenwriting classes and asked them to tell me what the strengths and weaknesses are of each character and what will test them as the show goes on. In each case, the majority of the class has guessed exactly what my intentions were. They felt the theme. While it would be enough that theme makes a writer's job easier, it is important that at least some of the people they are trying to reach understand on some level what the meaning of the story is. It was gratifying to see this happen. If I ever doubted the power of theme, moments like this clearly demonstrated its value and impact.

Conclusion

At the very beginning of this research project I felt I was investigating an interesting, undervalued and relatively unexplored area. These feelings were reinforced fairly quickly. The lack of space set aside in screenwriting books on theme was surprising, especially when we consider that most stressed the importance of theme. However, as I delved deeper into what would happen if I went to theme first in the writing process, I came to realise I was touching on what might be a new way to approach writing. From my experience, most writers develop a script from story first, less still they think of a character and go from there and 'find' the theme as they progress. The method I undertook was the reverse of this and I believe it is a valid and potentially more effective way to develop ideas.

There are two main reasons for this: conviction and direction.

Conviction

By looking at what issues, emotions and beliefs resonate with a writer and working on a story that comes from these findings gives the writer a deep sense of conviction. While many things can and have driven me as a writer – money being an obvious example – I do not believe anything drives a writer harder than true, pure conviction that a story is saying something profound, even in a comedy, and something the writer needs the world to experience. I believe that when a writer goes for story first, what drives them is interest. Interest is important and can certainly push a writer to continue developing but I would argue it is not nearly as strong as conviction. By developing my theme before my story, I had that conviction from the very beginning. I felt I had found the conviction Sidney Lumet feels is so important, as demonstrated in this passage from *Making Movies*:

But what is it about emotionally? What is the theme of the movie, the spine, the arc? What does the movie mean to me?
Personalizing the movie is very important. I'm going to be

working flat out for the next six, nine, twelve months. The picture had better have some meaning to me (Lumet 1995, p. 10).

Emotionally this proved vastly different from my previous story-led methods. If stories are as important as my research suggests, and theme is what makes those stories resonate, it seems logical to harness what is most important in a story to drive the process from the very beginning. It helped at each and every stage.

To know that your hard work was all going towards saying something that was personally profound drove me on through any moments of doubt. In my experience it is easy to give up on a story: I think of what appears to be a more exciting one, I see something similar and lose heart. Giving up on a theme is much harder. It is like giving up on your ideals, giving up on who you are. The power of theme has become apparent to me through this project. One of its greatest powers is to instill the fire of conviction in a writer.

Direction

There are so many factors that can divert a writer from producing their best work. One of the main difficulties I have personally faced is maintaining a sense of direction. I have found that by making theme the first thought it hones my practice and enables all decisions to be made with a clear thematic goal in mind. Again, it felt like I had understood and experienced the sense of direction theme gives Sidney Lumet.

What the movie is about will determine how it will be cast, how it will look, how it will be edited, how it will be musically scored, how it will be mixed, how the titles will look, and, with a good studio, how it will be released. What it's about will determine how it will be made (Lumet 1995, p. 10).

Where once I searched for plot with twists and turns (the surface of a story as Rabkin in *Writing The Pilot* teaches), I now looked for those same moments but

framed, as Lumet teaches, within a thematic concern. To know instantly if an idea was or wasn't dealing with the theme, and therefore if it was or was not able to be considered useful for the show, was a refreshing and timesaving craft device that meant my time was used in a far more economical fashion. While the prewriting phase of the script was longer, I more than made up for it when I got to the actual writing. To know that everything I write must in one way or another deal with and come from a clear theme was a new kind of writer's discipline and one I now greatly value.

Appendix

Through self-reflection, I realised the more haphazard, unstructured, thematic tasks I set myself could be refined, streamlined and ordered to increase the chance of finding theme in a way that truly, as Egri suggest, relates to a belief within the writer. I thought about emotions, film and story themes all at the same time. Looking back, I believe the following order would have been more useful.

i. *Access emotional range*

This works as a 'warming up' exercise while also helping the writer to access what affects them emotionally. As theme-led writing helps to emotionally connect the writer to the story they end up telling, making emotion the key first step is important.

The writer makes a list of what they believe are the five strongest emotions. They might be: happiness, sadness, fear, lust and love. They then pick a single emotion, for example, happiness, and begin writing down what makes them personally happy.

This can be a ten-minute exercise, but to really get the benefit it should be something that takes at least a day. To go about one's day while having a single emotion on one's mind is an unusual but insightful task.

Do this for all five emotions selected. When the task is finished, the writer goes over their findings and makes notes of the answers that most resonated with them. The writer should start to feel the emotional 'playing field' they inhabit. Doing this task before thinking about one's life or the stories that have resonated for them helps to free emotion from story, which I believe is a valuable first step, as at the end of the day as Lumet suggests, emotions are what we want the viewer to be left feeling.

ii. *Access thematic range (Part One)*

The writer lists ten films, plays, books and other stories that have affected them most. In hindsight, I believe that a week or so if possible, is spent refining the list until the writer is satisfied it genuinely reflects their true taste (it is important for it not to be a list of what they think they should choose, but what has truly moved them).

The work now becomes harder. Using McKee or Egri's method of arriving at a clear single thematic sentence that suggests character flaw, conflict and direction, the writer devises a thematic sentence that they believe encapsulates the message of the particular film, play, book or story. An example might be 'greed leads to isolation'. It is important the writer takes time to make each sentence truly reflect what they believe the story is trying to say.

When completed, the writer reflects on the thematic range of their favorite stories. Is it a big or small range? While they may have stuck to a similar genre, were the themes the same? This stage enables the writer to leave behind genre, style and tone preferences and see what it really is about a story that has moved them.

iii. *Access thematic range (Part Two)*

The writer lists what they believe are the greatest moments of triumph and defeat in their lives: the moments they have overcome adversity and the moments they have let themselves down and made their greatest mistakes.

Once this is done, the writer, again using McKee or Egri's method, devises a thematic statement for each of those moments. Once again it is important to take the time to make sure the statements truly encapsulate and explain what happened. Once completed, the writer has arrived at the thematic concerns of their lives.

They will see, and hopefully feel, what the 'message' of their life has been thus far. Doing these tasks separately, which wasn't how I originally did them, helps to make the findings clearer. To think only of one's life after previously thinking only of the stories that the writer feels most connected to helps to make the differences and hopefully similarities between real life and fiction clearer and thus more useful and illuminating.

iv. *Finding the thematic statement*

The writer spends time reflecting on all the thematic statements they have collected. Over a week or so they start to refine their list, keeping the ones that resonate most and discarding the ones they don't feel a connection to. The writer does this until they have arrived at the single statement that they most emotionally connect with at this point in time. This is the theme they will use to develop their project.

v. *Developing characters and a world that can carry the theme*

Using character development tools, such as the ones explored in this dissertation, the writer, using the theme, develops the characters for the story. It is important that at this early character development stage only backstory can be devised. The goal is to know as much about the characters before plotting the story. It is at this stage that potential worlds of the story can be developed. Once again the world that is created needs to depict the thematic concern. It is important to remain in this stage of development until the writer feels they have an exhaustive knowledge of the characters and the rules of the world. Who are they, where have they come from and what kind of world do they live in?

vi. *Develop macro narrative*

Using the theme, characters and world, the writer now begins plotting the main story. This is the big picture story. It must prove the theme that has been stated. It must be a clear thematic argument with both sides covered, before coming

down on the side of the theme. It is here that all traditional story concerns, for example, turning points are considered.

vii. Develop micro narrative

Making sure theme is apparent in every scene the writer plots all the beats of the story. This stage requires the writer to ensure the thematic argument has movement and is explored in a way that continually deepens and shows different sides of the thematic statement.

viii. Write

With the theme written on a piece of paper, stuck on the wall behind the computer, the fire of conviction burning in the belly and the comfort of direction firmly in the mind ... write!

The discovery of how theme can drive all stages of story development has indeed resulted in the most compelling work I have written thus far in my professional career. I believe it is a new way to look at development and it is one I plan to use and teach into the future.

Bibliography

- Aronson, L 2010, *The 21st Century Screenplay*, 1st edn, Silman-James Press, Beverly Hills, CA.
- Batty, C 2012, *Screenplays*, 1st edn, Kamera Books, Croydon, CRO 4YY.
- Campbell, J 1991, *The Power of Myth*, 1st edn, Anchor Books, New York, NY.
- Douglas, P 2007, *Writing the TV Drama Series*, 1st edn, Michael Wise Productions, Chelsea, MI.
- Edson, E 2011, *The Story Solution*, 1st edn, Michael Wise Productions, Saline, MI.
- Egri, L 1942, *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, 2nd edn, Touchstone, New York, NY.
- Epstein, A 2006, *Crafty TV Writing*, 1st edn, Holt Paperbacks, New York, NY.
- Goffman, E 1959, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 21st edn, Penguin, London.
- Hutzler, L 2005, *The Character Map*, 1st edn, Emotional Toolbox (ebook), California.
- Lumet, S 1996, *Making Movies*, 1st edn, Vintage Books, New York, NY.
- Mamet, D 1984, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, 1st edn, Grove Press, New York, NY.
- Mamet, D 1998, *3 Uses of the Knife*, 1st edn, Columbia University Press, New York, NY.
- Rabe, D 1985, *Hurlyburly*, 1st edn, Samuel French, New York, NY.
- Sandler, E 2007, *The TV Writer's Workbook*, 1st edn, Bantam Dell, New York, NY.
- Snyder, B 2005, *Save The Cat*, 1st edn, Michael Wise Productions, Chelsea, MI.
- Vogler, C 1998, *The Writer's Journey*, 3rd edn, Michael Wise Productions, Chelsea, MI.
- Wendig, C 2013, *The Kick-Ass Writer*, 1st edn, Writer's Digest Books, Blue Ash, OH.
- Yorke, J 2013, *Into The Woods*, 1st edn, Penguin Books, St Ives, PLC.